

I'd like to start at the beginning, you were born in Macon, when was that?

1939. August the 14th, 1939.

When did you start singing?

I started singing around the age of I guess six or seven in my father's church. He was a minister and I used to sing around the house and he'd hear me trying to sing, and I loved the gospel groups of that day, The Nightengales, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers. So he said to me one day, "Why don't you learn a song and sing before I bring the sermon? Why don't you sing a song? So I started learning the gospels and I started singing before he would bring the sermons and that's how it all started.

How did you end up in Philly?

Well we migrated from the South when I was just about 4 years old, my parents migrated here because of trying to do better economically 'cause farming was a way of life in the deep south in those days and the opportunity for employment and economic growth was greater in the North and so they migrated and North and that's how we migrated to Philadelphia.

There's a picture of you with a guitar, did you play guitar?

Yes I played guitar. I don't play much any more. I still play a little. I have a guitar, it was always one of my favorite instruments and I played the lead guitar.

Who are your influences in singing?

In the gospel field, it was the Dixie Hummingbirds, Ira Tucker & The Dixie Hummingbirds, Sam Cooke & The Soul Stirrers, Julius Cheek & The Sensational Nightingales, who we later had.... The Sensational Nightingales were one of my favorite groups... this is what really had the most impact on me starting out singing and they had a lot influence on my deciding to start singing and created a great interest because I loved to hear them sing and that's where it all started from at the beginning.

You also sang with the Gainors and Garnett Mimms?

Yes. And as I was saying, the Nightingales bass singer sang with the Gainors also and Garnett Mimms who went on to record a big multi-million seller, "Cry Baby," Sam Bell and I, a guy named Willie Combo, we made up

the Gainors. And as I said, one of my big heroes who was the bass singer with the Sensational Nightingales, he came off the road from traveling with the Sensational Nightingales and he wanted to sing spirituals around Philadelphia and he joined our group who later became The Gainors. We were in a group called the Bel Aires and Mercury sent a talent scout down to Philadelphia one night to sit in the back of the church and that's where they came, the big record companies to recruit talent, and they felt the best talent came out of the church, and they heard us singing, and they wanted to record us and they changed our name from the Bel Aires to the Gainors.

You were also with Bill Doggett?

I was with Bill Doggett after singing with the Gainors and recording several records on the Mercury label, we were produced by Clyde Otis, who at that time was producing Brook Benton also. We wasn't very successful with Mercury and I decided to leave the group and go on the road with Bill Doggett. He heard me singing one night in a club VPA in Philadelphia which happened to be right next door to the Uptown Theater where Georgie Woods brought all the big shows in and I was next door singing in the VPA one night, and Bill Doggett came through town. Not knowingly, he was looking for a blues singer to travel with his band. I had no knowledge of that at the time. But I happened to be singing a blues that night, one of B.B. King's songs, a song called "Sweet 16." Bill heard me singing it and it went over rather well and he sent for me and said he was interested in me coming to New York to talk to him about joinin' his band. So we set up the appointment. I went into New York the next week and he wanted me to join the band, meet the band in Savannah, Georgia the following week. And I agreed to that. We agreed on money, and a weekly salary and that type of thing and I joined the Bill Doggett Band at that point and met them in Savannah, Georgia the very next week. And I was with Bill Doggett I guess two years. Traveled all over the country.

Okay, that leads into my next question. Particularly on the Verve album there's a very strong blues influence, more so than say a lot of the other soul singers at the time. Who did you listen to in blues?

Well, I listened to B.B. King which was my favorite. I loved all the blues artists and I listened to Johnny Taylor, "Part Time Love," I believe he made that first and they was two of my favorite blues artists, and when we decided to do the Verve album, I talked to Ragovoy about that, Jerry, I says, "Hey Jerry, why don't we give a listen to these two blues," and he liked them. He says, "Let's do 'em. You know you sound great on 'em." And we did 'em and I love the arrangements he put on those because even though we did those blues, he put somethin' on them, he brought somethin' to the table with those two songs that was between gospel, jazz and blues was in

the middle and made it a little different. Because he would put those extensions on them, and they just blew your mind. And in fact it blows all the musician's *minds* all over the *world*, those extensions that Ragovoy writes when he writes those arrangements.

How did you hook up with Jerry Ragovoy?

After I come off the road with Bill Doggett, the reason I left Bill Doggett, Atlantic Records had been trying to sign me to record with Bill Doggett, and Bill wouldn't agree for me to go with Atlantic, so I got fed up with it. I said, well I'm leavin' the band. I went back home. And when I got home, the second day home, Sam Bell came by the house, he had a record in his hand from United Artists, and he says, "We just made this record." It was called "Cry Baby." And a guy named Jerry Ragovoy produced it. Well, in about a week that record was hittin' everywhere all over the world. That was one of the biggest records *ever*, went to number two in the Billboard Hot Hundred. And Ragovoy was lookin' for talent, and Garnett Mimms and Sam Bell said, "This guy Howard has a great voice." They let him hear some of my tapes and he fell in love with the voice. He said, "Well let's get him." So they contacted Georgie Woods who was a disc jockey in Philadelphia at that time, and said, "See if you can locate Howard for us." So Georgie Woods went on the radio and he was announcin' somethin' like hour on the hour, "If Howard Tate's out there or anyone knows where Howard Tate is, have him call Georgie Woods." Well, somebody got in touch with me, told me he was lookin' for me. I called him up, he says, "Get in touch with Bill Fox," who was Jerry's partner, and I got in touch with Bill Fox, and he says, "Call Jerry Ragovoy, he's interested in recordin' you." When I called Jerry, he said, "Can you come into New York?" I went in to New York, he was interested in recordin' me. I signed with them and that's how we met and that's how it started.

Well I guess now you know the session musicians on that album are pretty much legends.

Yes they are. We had great musicians. Paul (Griffin) on the piano, and Eric Gale on the guitar, they're legendary, I'll tell ya, and I attribute that to Jerry's great ability to handpick musicians and by the way we recorded *live*. When we recorded all those songs, we were always right there, we didn't punch anything in. I was singin', they were playin', and that's how we recorded. And that's how we got those *great* feels on those songs, because it was as though we were doin' a live show. Some producers, they'll punch the vocal in later, they'll do the horns later, we never did it that way. We did it *all* right there and that's how we got that great feel. Those musicians, they were the greatest.

Now some of those songs, "Ain't Nobody Home," "Look At Granny Run Run," "Get It While You Can," "How Come My Bulldog Don't Bark, did get some airplay. When they first came out, I was living in North Jersey, and I have a recollection of hearing "Ain't Nobody Home" on the soul stations. So did you start performing and touring?

The first record I made with Jerry Ragovoy was a record called "Ain't Nobody Home," and the other side of that record... funny I can't recall the other side, in fact. I was just told... I just played Boston, the first of August, and I was told up there that over in England, that 45 is goin' for three-hundred and twenty-some dollars which is just almost *unbelievable*. But that first record didn't do very well at all. And Jerry called me back into New York and says, "It wasn't you, it wasn't me, it was the material. But we wanted to record again, and he had three songs, "Ain't Nobody Home," "Look At Granny Run," and "How Come My Bulldog Don't Bark?" And we recorded those three songs. When they released "Ain't Nobody Home," that record was out and I was doin' construction work and I was mixin' mortar for 15 bricklayers and they were about to kill me because tryin' to supply 15 bricklayers with mortar and bricks will work you till your tongue hang out. So I come home from work and mortar all over my face and mortar all over my boots from mixing that mortar all day, and I was dog tired. And saw this Cadillac sittin' in front of the door. It was Bill Fox. And he blew the horn as I was goin' up the steps and I went over and said, "Hi Bill, what's up?" And he says, "You gotta go to Detroit. Right away! The record just went to number one in several of the key markets and Detroit is one." I said, "Well all right. Can I shower first?" He says, "You don't have time for that. You gotta catch the plane, and the flight's gonna be leavin', and we just got enough time to get you to the airport." My wife she was on the porch with the baby in her arms and everything. I said, "I don't have time to even shower." He said, "You got to do all that there." So he ran his hand in his pocket and gave me ten 100 dollar bills, a thousand dollars, he says, "Buy somethin' to wear out there. Your record's number one, you're playin' the Twenty Grand with Marvin Gaye." So they whizzed me to the airport, I got on the plane, dirty as a pig, they must've thought I was nuts or somethin', but that's just how quick it happened. And I went out there and MGM, that's the parent company to Verve, they had some national promotion there with the Limousine, right at the airport, and as soon as I got in the Limousine, the disc jockey, whoever was on, I can't recall the name now, says, "And now the number one record in Detroit," and here it comes (sings the intro) "Ain't Nobody Home." *Well, that was the greatest feeling that an artist can ever have!* It was the number one record there and of course we were playin' the Twenty Grand the next night with Marvin Gaye. And it was just unbelievable. But this the only business you can be poor as a George turkey today and make a record and go sleep and wake up a multi-

millionaire. That's how quick it can happen and so, that's how it happened with the first hit record I ever had, "Ain't Nobody Home."

Where did "Get It While You Can" get to, did that do well?

Yes, very well. And of course when Janis Joplin did it, it just put icin' on the cake! A major superstar like that to do my record, my music. I was so *honored* to have her do it. But yes, we did "Get It While You Can." When we made that record in the studio, we knew that song was... we was makin' a serious statement with that song because it showed the *versatility* of Howard Tate. A lot of artists, they can sing one style, but I'm blessed with a gift, I can sing any style. I can sing the blues, I can come back and sing a "Get It While You Can," I can come back and sing a funk song in the order of Wilson Pickett or James Brown, I can do it all. That shows Ragovoy was tryin' to show my versatility there and he did a great job of it. And "Get It While You Can" has always been one of my favorite songs and yes that's the title of the album, the first album, *Get It While You Can*.

Now was the next album the one you did for Turntable Records and you did that in Jamaica?

Yes. They recorded the tracks in Jamaica. Really, that album was done by The Coasters, but they wasn't satisfied with the rendition The Coasters did on the songs, so they asked me would I try to do "These Are The Things That Make Me Know You're Gone" and "That's What Happens When You Leave Me Baby." They wanted to hear how it sounded on it. We they were so impressed they said, "You gotta do the whole album." So I did that whole album, but originally those songs were written for The Coasters.

So they just sent you the tracks and you recorded it here?

They had the tracks, they brought 'em over from Jamaica and I recorded 'em in New York.

The version of "Chain Gang" on there....

"Chain Gang," yes, very very powerful soulful song.

Then you went back with Ragovoy and went to Atlantic.

I felt as though, Jerry, one thing he could do and that is *write* for Howard Tate. He felt Howard Tate, he dreamed, he slept, he ate Howard Tate. There's something about my style and his ability to produce and arrange that went hand in glove. In fact, we're doin' an album now that's gonna completely rock the music world when it's released. It is so sensational that

I can't find words to depict to you how sensational it is. We've been doin' a couple of the songs on the shows we're doin'. One is called, "Sorry, Wrong Number," and the other one's "Mama Was Right."

Speaking of singing any kind of songs, two songs on the Atlantic album, one in particular, I was almost gonna shout this out at the show was when you covered Bob Dylan's "Girl From The North Country."

"Girl From The North Country." *Great* song. I enjoyed doing that song so much and I kind of wanted to do that song in New York, but I knew Atlantic was gettin' ready to release this CD again. It's comin' out you know, next week. And I'm gonna be doin' it on the new show when I go around on the new tour, "Girl of the North Country Fair," and also The Band's "Jemima Surrender." We're gonna be doin' all of those. Great song by Bob Dylan. "Girl of the North Country Fair."

I thought that arrangement was just...

Super.

Incredible, 'cause I have all the other versions of it was well and that arrangement blows my mind. I don't know if you know this, but it came out on an album - Atlantic has a deal with this company called Rhino that reissues old stuff - and they put it on an album called *Black On White*.

Really? With me doin' it?

Yep. This was all R&B singers doing quote unquote white songs.

Was "She's A Burglar" a hit?

They were pushin' "Keep Cool," but I think they're gonna push "She's A Burglar" this time. I think that's a smash hit record.

The first song I heard from that album was a cover of "Where Did My Baby Go" by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

That brings back a lot of memories. I did a lot of work with Paul Butterfield.

So then what happened?

Well. The only problem I had with Atlantic and with Verve back then was getting' paid. We did fine with everything, but then when it came time to get paid, you could never get paid. So that was the problem I had and that

disgusted me at the time and of course I left Ragovoy, I left Atlantic and I just said the heck with it. You know, if they're not gonna pay me, then I just won't record. And I imagine a lot of artists do that. It wasn't just me. Most artists. When you look at Motown, the only artists got paid there was Smokey Robinson and I do believe that's because he was married to Berry's sister and Diana Ross, and I believe that's because she had his child. But the others didn't get paid. It was a thing of that day. Of course, today's a different day and that's why I decided to come back and do another CD, and do some more albums to sort of leave a legacy here that will be remembered till the end of time.

During the last 30 years or so, did you have any idea that there were people interested at all in your music?

No I didn't. I knew there was underground interest in me *years* ago. I knew that. But they kept me booked on the chitlin' circuit and I'll say it that way because that's what it really is, that's what they call it. I was on all the one-nighters down through Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, Texas. I worked 360 days a year for 20 years! And they kept me on those, and the underground, they always tried to book me, especially overseas. But the agency I was with, Universal, they kept me on those tours, all the time. It come from not having good management. I should never have been on those tours. I should've been playing the underground circuit where most of my fans are today all over the world and that's where my music is really appreciated and loved. I knew there was interest. They tried to book me in England *so many times*. And I'd never go because I got comfortable doin' the Southern tours and that's where it was at. And what to the booking agencies care?

I remember hearin' your record and playing it for friends and I knew you were from Philly, and I would try and look you up in the Philly phone book, and I had other friends who talked to the Dixie Hummingbirds, and nobody knew.

Ira Tucker wanted me to do some of his songs, "Love Me Like A Rock." You remember that? They made that. Well he gave me that song to do. And I didn't do the song.

I got so disgusted with the music business until I just sort of dropped out and nobody knew really where to find me because I got heavily involved with the church and they wasn't lookin' in the right places or they could've found me very easily.

When did you get involved with the church?

I really got involved with the church heavy in 1994. That's when I really really got involved with the church. But the church has always been a part of my life. My roots come from the church.

Would you at some point like to do a gospel record?

Yes, we plan to do. I was talking with Jerry about doing a couple of gospel songs or one gospel song on this CD. I'm writin' and I got a couple of ideas. They're not finalized yet, but definitely so. Because God is first in my life and that's the thing that even singin' secular music you know I hope to draw people to Christ by the life that I live. The way I carry myself, the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I act, and you know, show a lot of love. That's why I have no problem singin' love songs because God is love.

At the show at the Village Underground, were those the original charts?

No. We had those written up. Those charts, Jerry tried to find some, mine, I don't know where they went. All those years, I had 'em all and I guess movin' around, and I never thought I'd use them again. But we had those charts written up, we had the music written up and now I have all the arrangements again because I'm workin' again and the dates are comin' in. Of course I'm bein' selective you know, but I can see six months down the road, I'll probably be travelin' five nights a week or maybe four nights a week, dependin' on what I wanna take, but we had to have all the charts written over. Jerry found some. He found some of them and the ones he didn't find, we had 'em redone over. And he wrote some of them.

Are you using the Uptown Horns everywhere? Did they go with you to Boston?

They didn't go to Boston with me, but we're looking into them being my band. We are negotiating that at this very moment. Jerry is very involved in negotiating that because we want to take them overseas with us. We want that Howard Tate sound. The public deserves it and we don't wanna go into towns with one band here, and one band there. We want to have that sound to really please the people. They're such a great audience and they deserve the best and we wanna give it to them. And we feel the Uptown Horns is a *great* band. They've been my fans, and they know my music. They've played it. And we feel that me and the Uptown Horns, they *fit*, like hand and glove.

You're going to Europe soon?

October 16th. United Kingdom, that's up Northern England, isn't it? Southern part of England. We'll be going to Sweden, Stockholm, Germany, France, Australia.

Is this an exciting time for you now?

Very much so. I love it. I'm really excited. When I got to Boston, I was ready to do a great show, a good show for the people. I'm really pumped up and excited. I'm ready to go, you know. I find that I'm almost like a fighter who's training for a fight to reach his peak, and I find I'm beginnin' to get up that way. I realize my fans, how great they are, they bought my music all these years and they appreciate it so much and the least I can do is give 'em a dynamite show, and record some more great music for 'em. And I'm so blessed to have Jerry with me. We're together again and you know of course he's the greatest producer and writer in the *world* today (laughs). I know Quincy Jones is good and Burt Bacharach but I'll take Jerry Ragovoy.

One of the things about the show that struck me, when you came on stage and started singing, after waiting all that time to see you, it was almost as if you had just recorded the album.

(laughs) Really?

And walked on stage.

Fantastic. (laughs)

You can still do it! The other thing I liked about the show was you didn't really try to change anything, you left the songs the way they were when you cut them.

Well that's what I tried to do, because the fans they know the songs, they know every word. They've lived those songs and that music all these years, and I felt as though it was deserving to keep 'em *just like they were*. So when they look back and remember they saw Howard Tate, and many of them will see me again, but some won't, but they'll say "It was just like the record."

In recording the new album are you trying for the live sound or are you doing the modern thing, recording tracks?

No, no, we're going for the live sound. That was one thing Jerry said, "No way. We're doing the live thing with the live musicians. We want our public to get the best they deserve. We don't want horns from a synthesizer and all that. We want the live horns.

Is the album completed?

We're still recording and we're moving along. We got about five, six songs now. We're getting' close too because we're gonna have to put a couple of our originals on there that we did because that would only be right. We're shooting to have it out before the end of the year. We've done some work in Alpharetta, Georgia, Jerry built a studio down there and we're doin' some work down there, but we're doin' a lot of the work in New York.

What are you looking to do now?

I'm looking to finish the album, do the tours, I'm going to New Orleans again, gonna be goin' overseas, gonna go to the West Coast. I got to come back and play Atlantic City or Philadelphia. I'm excited about touring again and I'm excited about the new CD and getting' ready to do the next CD.

Did you pay attention to music at all during the time you were not playing?

Yes. Very much so. I'm a Michael Jackson fan. I like Janice, Janet Jackson, and he's gone now, but I loved Jimi Hendrix, he was one of my *favorites* and of course a lot of the great artists are now deceased but I love music and I *love* country western. Faith Hill and Kenny Rogers, and what's his name Tug McGraw, the McGraw guy, and this other one, the one that's got this big hat, what's his name? I love country western. I wanna do a country western song.

Did you listen to the older country guys?

Yes, yes. That's why we're excited to do "Girl Of the North Country Fair."

There was another singer who came out of gospel who reminded me of your style who originally was in a band named the Highway QCs, named O.V. Wright?

That was one of my favorite gospel groups.

Years ago I was interviewing a musician, a guitar player named Ry Cooder...

Yes! He did "Look At Granny Run (laughs)."

So the new album's gonna be out on Atlantic again?

They're re-releasing the CD. The new album, I don't know what label that's gonna be on.

Well when it comes out, I hope it does something.

Well, Jerry's great in that area and I'm sure we're not gonna be with somebody who's just gonna be sittin' down. We're gonna be with somebody who's gonna do a job.